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AUTHOR Winter, Paul A.; Morgenthal, Jayne R.
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ABSTRACT

One of the most alarming developments confronting public school districts today is the shrinkage of applicant pools for principal vacancies. This study was conducted as an empirical investigation about factors that influence high school principal recruitment in a reform environment. Its objective was to examine the influence of school academic achievement, as measured by student scores on standardized achievement tests, school location (inner city, suburban, rural), and school assignment of the job applicant (elementary, middle school, high school) on job applicant ratings of principal positions. Randomly selected assistant principals in Kentucky (N=189) role-played as job applicants and rated principal jobs depicted in formal job descriptions. The most significant finding was that assistant principals rated jobs at low-achieving schools much lower than jobs at high-achieving schools. The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 also has a negative influence on principal recruitment because it places new demands on principals, such as increased accountability for student achievement and diminished governance authority. This situation leads to frustration, increased stress, and decreased job satisfaction. Study findings produce new knowledge that informs principal recruitment. It is hoped that study results will stimulate additional research interest in this area. (Contains 22 references, 2 tables, and 1 figure.) (RT)

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Running Head: THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

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The Impact of School Achievement on Principal Recruitment in a Reform Environment

Paul A. Winter and Jayne R. Morgenthal

University of Louisville

School of Education

Education Building, Room #326

Louisville, KY 40292

Phone: (502) 852-0617

Fax: (502) 852-4563

E-mail: winter@louisville.edu

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Abstract

The study purpose was to examine the influence of school academic achievement, as measured by student scores on standardized achievement tests, school location (inner city, suburban, rural), and school assignment of the job applicant (elementary, middle school, high school) on job applicant ratings of principal jobs. Randomly selected assistant principals (N = 189) role-played as job applicants and rated principal jobs depicted in formal job descriptions. The study was a factorial experiment involving a 3 x 3 x (3 x S) fixed-factor between-within analysis of variance. The ANOVA detected a significant main effect for school achievement ($\underline{\omega}^2$ = .64) and a significant two-way interaction between school achievement and school assignment ($\underline{\omega}^2$ = .15). The most significant finding was that assistant principals rated jobs at low achieving schools much lower than jobs at high achieving schools. Implications for recruitment theory and principal recruitment are discussed.

The Impact of School Achievement on Principal Recruitment in a Reform Environment

One of the most alarming developments confronting public school districts today is the shrinkage of applicant pools for principal vacancies (Educational Research Service, 1998; McAdams, 1998). This phenomenon is making principal recruitment an increasingly challenging endeavor. The decline in qualified applicants is happening at a time when massive principal retirements are occurring among members of the post-WW II "baby boom" generation (National Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals, 1998). Further compounding this problem is the apparent decline in the attractiveness of the job of principal, especially if the position is at the high school level and is located in an area undergoing school restructuring (Murphy & Beck, 1994).

Murphy and Beck (1994) interviewed high school principals and reported the frustration of principals who are expected to "work actively to transform, restructure and redefine schools while they hold organizational positions historically and traditionally committed to resisting change and maintaining stability" (p. 59). The negative aspects of the job most often reported by principals were: (a) a long 60-80 hour work week, (b) the growing complexity of the job, (c) the frequent

requirement to supervise school activities in the evening, (d) being "bombarded" by the high expectations of school constituents and district office superiors, (e) the ever-growing paperwork created by state and district mandates, (f) the number of social problems principals are expected to address, and (g) the challenge of convincing teachers to become more collaborative and otherwise change their teaching to improve student achievement.

Yerkes and Guaglianone (1998) characterized the factors making high school principal recruitment difficult as a combination of personnel, institutional, and contextual issues.

> Issues that are involved in the shortage of high school principal applicants center on personnel, institutional and contextual issues, in like order of importance. The personnel concerns are the large number of pending retirements, individuals leaving administrative positions for other types of employment, and the need for bright, dedicated and competent people to meet the professional and intellectual demands of school leadership in a competitive, information-age society. Institutional concerns are difficulties attributed to the changing role of the principal, and contextual concerns are those attributed to the public's view of education in general. (Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998, p. 5)

Finally, principal recruitment should also be a concern for education researchers. Despite the existence of empirical studies about teacher recruitment, the education literature is virtually devoid of empirical research about administrator recruitment (Pounder & Young, 1996).

Purpose

This study was an empirical investigation about factors that influence high school principal recruitment in a reform environment. We responded to the call by Pounder and Young (1996) for empirical investigations about recruiting public school administrators. The study objective was to examine the influence of school academic achievement, as measured by student scores on standardized achievement tests, school location (inner city, suburban, rural), and school assignment of the job applicant (elementary, middle school, high school) on job applicant ratings of principal positions. The site for the study was Kentucky, a state that has been undergoing systemic school reform for over a decade in accordance with the mandates of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (1990).

The Principalship in Kentucky

With the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), the selection of principals devolved to local school councils composed of the principal, two parents, three teachers,

or a multiple of this configuration. The KERA legislation states (KRS.160.345):

> ...if the vacancy to be filled is the position of principal, the school council shall make the selection of the new principal from among the persons recommended by the local school superintendent. Personnel decisions made at the local school level under the authority of this subsection shall be binding on the superintendent who completes the hiring process.

After principals are hired, they become the most visible players in a school reform effort whose progress is measured, in part, by standardized test scores that classify schools as "in need of assistance," "progressing," or "meets goal." The stakes are high for all involved, but the principal is the person held most accountable for school improvement.

> This new assessment procedure is intended to focus on the ability of students to apply knowledge and skills they have acquired rather than merely to respond to multiple-choice tests. Successful schools will receive monetary rewards. [...] Unsuccessful schools will be required to develop and implement improvement plans...if a school fails to improve, it may be designated a "school in crisis", and the state may appoint one or more "distinguished educators" to provide assistance. (Van Meter, 1991, p. 58)

If deemed necessary by the officials directing the restructuring of a school in crisis, teachers and principals can be dismissed for failing to make progress towards meeting the school's student achievement goals. Given the importance of school achievement in the state's reform agenda, we selected school achievement as a primary independent variable of interest. This study represents the first empirical investigation of this factor in the principal recruitment context. The procedures used to operationalize the school achievement variable are explained later in this manuscript.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

Private sector recruitment researchers developed the operational definition and theory that framed this investigation. The definition of recruitment adopted for this research was the one developed by Barber (1998): "Recruitment includes those practices and activities carried on by the organization with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential employees" (p. 44). Our research focused on the decisions made by applicants for principal vacancies prior to the employment interview, such as the decision to accept an interview for the job. Research about decisions prior to the employment interview is still limited. By making these types of applicant decisions a research focus, we responded to a call by Rynes (1991) for new studies about this topic: "[M]ost

recruitment research has been conducted subsequent to the first employment interview. As such, little is known about the determinants of job applicant behaviors" (p. 435). A scarcity of investigations about applicant decisions also exists in the education literature (Winter and Dunaway, 1997; Young, Place, Rinehart, Jury, & Baits, 1997).

Several recruitment theories have emerged in the private sector (Rynes, 1991; Rynes & Barber, 1990; Schwab, 1982; Schwab, Rynes, & Aldag, 1987). The theory most germane to this research is the applicant attraction model developed by Rynes and Barber (1990). These researchers postulated that organizational recruiters operate within certain contingencies that impact recruitment outcomes. Among these contingencies are labor market conditions, characteristics of the position vacancy, and characteristics of the hiring organization. This research focused on two organizational characteristics: school achievement and school location. An underlying postulate of the Rynes and Barber (1990) model is that, in a given recruitment context, organizational characteristics impact recruitment outcomes such as the decision to accept an interview for the job. In this research, we sought to determine if applicant attraction to principal jobs described in formal job descriptions are influenced by the school's achievement and location. School achievement was examined for reasons explicated

earlier. School location became an independent variable because Rynes and Lawler (1983) discovered school location impacted the reactions of teachers to jobs described in teacher job descriptions. Teachers preferred jobs that would keep them in the Midwest and out of inner city schools. The school locations of jobs rated by the participants in this study were inner city, suburban, or rural. This was the first study to address the influence of school location relative to principal recruitment. We also examined the influence of the participants' current job assignments (elementary, middle school, high school). The participants were elementary, middle school, and high school assistant principals, all of whom were principal certified and qualified to apply for a high school principal position in Kentucky.

Methods

This investigation was a recruitment simulation, with the participants role-playing as job applicants and reacting to high school principal jobs described in formal job descriptions. The study was a factorial experiment (Campbell & Stanley, 1963), involving a 3 x 3 x (3 x S) fixed-factor between-within analysis of variance (Kirk, 1990, p. 545). The cell sizes were equal, making this a balanced design (Keppel, 1991).

Participants

The focal population for this study was all assistant principals in 13 school districts located in four geographic regions of Kentucky (North, South, East, West). Invitations were sent to 351 assistant principals and 271 (77%) volunteered to take part in the research. The sample (N = 189) was selected at random from the group of volunteers. There were 63 assistant principals for each school level (elementary, middle school, high school). There were seven participants assigned to each of the 27 cells rendered by the three-way between-within ANOVA design. Because there were three repeated measures for the within-groups independent variable (school achievement), there were 567 (3 x 189) observations. Statistical power (Cohen, 1977) for this experiment exceeded 99%, making it virtually certain that, if there was a statistically significant effect, that effect would be detected.

The study participants performed two tasks. First, they completed a biographical data sheet. Second, they rated three principal jobs depicted in a job description instrument. In performing these tasks, the participants role-played as job applicants responding to a job description mailing similar to the job description mailings conducted by district personnel directors to generate applicant pools for principal vacancies.

The biographical data sheet and the job description instrument operationalized the independent and dependent variables.

Independent Variables

The independent variables in this analysis were: (a) school achievement (in need of assistance, progressing, meets goal); (b) school location (inner city, suburban, rural); and (c) school assignment (elementary, middle school, high school). The school assignment variable was operationalized by participant self-reports on the biographical data sheet. The job description instrument operationalized school achievement and school location. There were three versions of the job description instrument. Each version described three high school principal vacancies within a school district depicted as being located at either an inner city, suburban, or rural location. The three jobs described were at schools rated for their achievement as in need of assistance, progressing, and meets goal. These were the actual classifications given to schools based on achievement test scores. School achievement was the within-groups (i.e., repeated measures) variable. School assignment and school location were between-groups variables.

The first step in constructing the job description instrument was to review actual job descriptions used for principal recruitment. The next step was to draft job descriptions for review by a panel of experts (N = 6). The panel

members were practicing administrators who were experienced in principal recruitment. The third step was to have a pilot group (N = 28), with characteristics similar to those of the actual study participants, complete the research instruments.

The purpose of the pilot study was to check the manipulations for the school achievement and school location variables. After handing in the completed instruments, the pilot participants received a two-item multiple-choice questionnaire. The first item queried the participants about the location of the principal jobs they had just reviewed. The possible item responses were: inner city, suburban, and rural. Twenty-seven (96%) of the 28 participants answered the first item correctly. The second item queried the participants about the achievement of the three schools depicted in the job descriptions. The possible responses for this item were: in need of assistance, progressing, meets goal, and each of the above. The correct response was each of the above. Twenty-seven participants (96%) answered the second item correctly. The above results indicated the participants had perceived the manipulations for school achievement and school location as intended and the job description instrument was adopted, without further modification, for use in the actual study.

The content of the job description instrument began with instructions informing the participants they would read job

descriptions for three high school principal vacancies in a "hypothetical" school district. Following the instructions was a section about the district. The district information was held constant across the three versions of the job description instrument and provided general information such as: "All district schools have strong parent organizations and site-based decisions-making councils." Following the district section was a job qualifications section stating minimum qualifications for the positions (e.g., principal certification, three years teaching experience).

Following the job qualifications was a sentence that manipulated school location. For example, for the version of the instrument that depicted schools at rural locations, the sentence was: "All three principal vacancies described below are in rural schools located in small rural communities with populations of approximately 5,000." Following the sentence that manipulated school location were descriptions of three vacancies. Each description included general information about the school such as the school's enrollment and the size of the teaching staff.

Following the general information, each description had a sentence that manipulated school achievement. Each participant rated jobs at three schools (in need of assistance, progressing, meets goal). The sentence that manipulated the progressing

school was: "The school received a student achievement rating for this past school year of progressing from the Kentucky Department of Education." Following the job description were two rating items that operationalized the dependent variable.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was a two-item additive composite rating of the job. The two items were: (a) "If offered, how likely would you be to accept an interview for the high school principal job described?" and (b) "If offered, how likely would you be to accept the high school principal job described?" The participants responded to the items on 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = Not Very Likely to Accept, 5 = Very Likely to Accept). These rating items were based on identical items used in recruitment studies performed in the private sector (Barber, 1998; Rynes, 1991) and the education sector (Winter & Dunaway, Young, Rinehart, & Heneman, 1993; Young et al., 1997). The coefficient alpha's for the three composite ratings were .97, .96, .96, which greatly exceeded the minimum (.60) recommended for use of a composite score in statistical analysis (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, the average age of the study participants was 44.1 years. Of the 189 study participants, 102 were male and 87 were female. Thirteen percent of the

participants were Black American, 86% were White American, and 1% was Asian American. Twenty-four percent of the participants were single and 76% were married.

The ANOVA results in Table 2 indicated there was a significant main effect for school achievement and a significant two-way interaction between school achievement and school assignment. As indicated by the omega-square reported in Table 2, the school achievement main effect accounted for 64% of the variance in applicant rating of the job. The school achievement by school assignment interaction explained 15% of variance in applicant rating of the job. According to Cohen, (1977, pp. 284-288), an omega-square of 15% is a "large" effect size. The magnitude of the main effect for school achievement far exceeded the criterion for a large effect size. The significant interaction also met the criterion for a large effect size.

The procedure used to determine the precise mean score differences for school achievement was a post hoc test computed according to procedures described by Kirk (1990, p. 547). The mean job rating for schools characterized as meets goal ($\underline{M}$ = 9.1) was significantly greater than the mean job rating for schools characterized as progressing ($\underline{M}$ = 8.0). The mean job rating for schools characterized as meets goal ($\underline{M}$ = 9.1) was significantly greater than mean job rating for schools characterized as in need of assistance ($\underline{M}$ = 4.1). Finally, the

mean job rating for schools characterized as progressing (M = 8.0) was significantly greater than the mean rating of in need of assistance (M = 4.1).

Because the school achievement effect was subsumed by the school achievement by school assignment interaction, the remainder of the ANOVA analysis concentrated on the interaction effect. The school achievement by school assignment interaction is depicted in the graph shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

As can be seen in Figure 1, the interaction was ordinal. Post hoc tests served to identify the precise mean score differences. Among applicants rating the job at schools characterized as meets goal, elementary assistant principals (M = 9.68) rated the job significantly higher than high school assistant principals (M = 8.35). Elementary assistant principal and high school assistant principal mean job ratings did not differ significantly from the middle school assistant principal mean rating (M = 9.33).

Among applicants rating jobs at schools characterized as progressing, there were no significant mean score differences: elementary (M = 8.37), middle school assistant principals (M = 7.95), and high school assistant principals (M = 7.70). Among

applicants rating jobs at schools characterized as in need of assistance, elementary school assistant principals ($\underline{M}$ = 3.0) rated the job significantly lower than did high school assistant principals ($\underline{M}$ = 5.48). Middle school assistant principals ($\underline{M}$ = 3.78) also rated the job significantly lower than did high school assistant principals ($\underline{M}$ = 5.48). There was no significant difference in the mean score ratings between elementary school assistant principals ($\underline{M}$ = 3.0) and middle school assistant principals ($\underline{M}$ = 3.78).

Discussion

Nationally, principal recruitment is one of the most critical issues facing public schools today. Principals are held be more accountable for student achievement, especially in states like Kentucky that are undergoing systemic school reform. The job is now more challenging because school reform mandates place greater emphasis on principals being instructional leaders who lead the effort to improve student learning.

McAdams (1990) addressed the issue of shrinking applicant pools for principal vacancies:

> The changing nature of school administration--in terms of professional status, complexity of tasks, time demands, and accountability for results--is another deterrent to pursuing an administrative career. Rightly or wrongly, the school principal[s] of 30 years ago [were] in many ways the

> master of [their] domain...[they] enjoyed a parental rather than a quasi-legal relationship with students and experienced far less formal and less frequent interactions with parents and community groups. Changes over the last few decades have enhanced the power and influence of students, teachers, and the community and helped advance democratic governance. (p. 38)

Educational researchers report a growing national concern over the apparent lack of qualified applicants for principal vacancies. More educators are earning administrative certificates, but fewer are actually applying for available positions (Smith & Andrews, 1989). The findings of this study have implications for recruitment theory, recruitment practice, and future research.

Recruitment Theory

The theoretical framework used for this investigation was the applicant attraction model developed by Rynes and Barber (1990). The model postulates that organizational characteristics are among the most important factors influencing applicant attraction to position vacancies. Examining organizational characteristics, as suggested by the Rynes and Barber model, resulted in significant findings. The most powerful effect detected in this study was the organizational characteristic of school achievement. The Rynes and Barber model should be used in

future recruitment research. Other components of the model, such as the labor market contingency and the recruitment strategy of targeting pools of non-traditional applicants, have relevance for recruiting educational personnel such as principals and superintendents. The labor market conditions for principals (i.e., short supply of applicants) may force school districts to consider non-traditional principal applicants, such as private and public sector executives and retired military officers.

Recruitment Practice

The study results reveal that assistant principals rate jobs at schools with an achievement rating of meets goal highest, jobs at progressing schools next highest, and jobs at in need of assistance schools lowest. The recruitment implication of this finding is that the impact of school achievement is a potentially decisive factor in the applicant decision to interview for, and accept, a job as principal. If a low achieving school is trying to recruit a principal, the school's low achievement will impede the recruitment effort. The reverse is true of high achieving schools. High performing schools should be better able to attract candidates for principal vacancies. From a practical perspective, district recruitment officials will have to invest more time and resources to recruit principals to low performing schools. Generating adequate applicant pools may require school districts

to offer potential job applicants monetary inducements (e.g., signing bonus), non-monetary inducements (e.g., additional support personnel) to apply for, and accept, principal jobs.

The study results also indicate there is an interaction between school achievement and job assignment. Principal applicants want high achieving schools, with elementary assistant principals rating high school principal jobs in higher achieving schools (meets goal, progressing) higher than do middle school and high school assistant principals. Possible reasons for this interaction include the promotion to a higher school level (i.e., elementary school to high school) and the high accountability for student achievement. High school assistant principals appear to be more willing to accept a principal position in a high school with low achievement than are elementary and middle school assistant principals. The reason for this finding could be that, because high school assistant principals are already familiar with the high school environment, they may feel better prepared than elementary and middle school assistant principals to manage a low performing high school.

School location (inner city, suburban, rural) was not significant, but there was a hierarchy of ratings by location. The means for school location were: inner city ($\underline{M}$ = 6.8), rural ($\underline{M}$ = 7.0), and suburban ($\underline{M}$ = 7.4). The majority of the

participants preferred a suburban school location. The next most preferred location was rural and the least preferred school location was the inner city. However, because the main effect of school location was not statistically significant, school location appears not be as important a factor in principal recruitment as it is in teacher recruitment (Rynes & Lawler, 1983).

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 placed new demands on principals. These demands are coupled with the growing shortage of people willing to go into the profession. The diminution of the principal's authority through shared governance with parents and teachers serving on school councils has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in responsibility. The principal is now held accountable for student performance. Higher accountability may be an advancement for public schools, but the principal is caught in the classic middle-management bind of responsibility without commensurate authority. This situation leads to frustration, increased stress, and decreased job satisfaction (McAdams, 1998).

Future Research

From a research perspective, recruitment investigators have paid little attention to administrative positions, particularly the position of high school principal. Pounder and Young (1996) noted that there are few empirical studies that address the

attracting applicants for administrative positions. Other administrative jobs that could become the focus of future empirical studies include the positions of superintendent and central office administrator.

There are many variables, yet to be investigated, that may affect an individual's attraction to a principal vacancy. As noted earlier, incentive programs may be needed to attract individuals to the position, especially for jobs located at low achieving schools. The Rynes and Barber (1990) model discussed earlier postulated that, in a given recruitment context, inducements (monetary, non-monetary) may increase application and job acceptance rates for position vacancies.

Another area for future research is restructuring the job of principal to make it more attractive to potential applicants (McAdams, 1998). School districts could investigate restructuring the job to place more emphasis on curriculum and instruction, and less emphasis on budgeting, legal issues, and district-level responsibilities. The job could be restructured to require fewer evening responsibilities. To further address the shrinkage in principal applicant pools, McAdams (1998) recommended school districts experiment with different methods of nurturing cadres of future principals. Current principals could serve as mentors for recruiting future principals from the ranks of the district's teachers and school counselors. Future

studies might address the possible influence of mentors on (a) the decision to enter a principal preparation program and (b) the decision to apply for a vacant position.

Study Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. The participants reacted to a recruitment practice under simulated conditions. It is possible that assistant principals reacting to a high school principal vacancy under actual recruitment conditions might have reacted differently than did the participants in this investigation.

The study results are also subject to limitations related to the research site. The study participants were from a single midwestern state undergoing systematic school reform. Individuals from other geographical locations, or from regions not undergoing reform, might have reacted differently to the high school principal job than did the participants in this study.

Conclusion

This study generated new knowledge about principal recruitment at a time when there are shrinking pools of qualified applicants. With increasing frequency, school districts are reporting low numbers of quality applicants and university educators are noticing that fewer graduate students

express interest in working as secondary school principals (Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998).

However, despite the limitations noted above, the study findings provide new knowledge that informs principal recruitment. School officials need as much empirical information as possible about factors that affect recruitment. Given the critical nature of the job of school principal, especially in high-stakes school reform environments like Kentucky, it is important that the task of investigating factors that impact principal recruitment be continued. It is hoped that the results of this study, and the methodological approaches employed, will stimulate additional research interest in principal recruitment and, thereby, contribute to improving the leadership of our nation's public schools.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Participants (N = 189)

Variable	n	%	Mean	SD	Range
Age			44.1	6.5	28-60
Gender					
Male	102	54			
Female	87	46			
Race					
Black	25	13			
White	162	86			
Other	2	1			
Marital Status					
Single	46	24			
Married	143	76			
Dependent Children			1.4	1.1	0-5
Teaching Experience (Yrs)			12.1	5.9	2-31
School Assignment					
Elementary	63	33			
Middle	63	33			
High	63	33			
Admin. Experience (Yrs)			8.9	5.4	1-31

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for Applicant Rating by School Assignment, School Achievement, School Location (N =189)

Source of Variance	SS	df	MS	F
Between Subjects				
School Assignment(A)	3.1	2	1.5	.2
School Location (B)	39.1	2	19.6	2.9
A X B	25.0	4	6.2	.9
Error/BS	1,216.7	180	6.8	
Within Subjects				
School Achievement(C)	2,645.3	2	1,322.7	512.0 *(a)
A X C	273.5	4	68.4	26.5 *(b)
B X C	17.4	4	4.3	1.7
A X B X C	27.2	8	3.4	1.3
Error/WS	930.0	360	2.6	
Total	5,177.3	566		

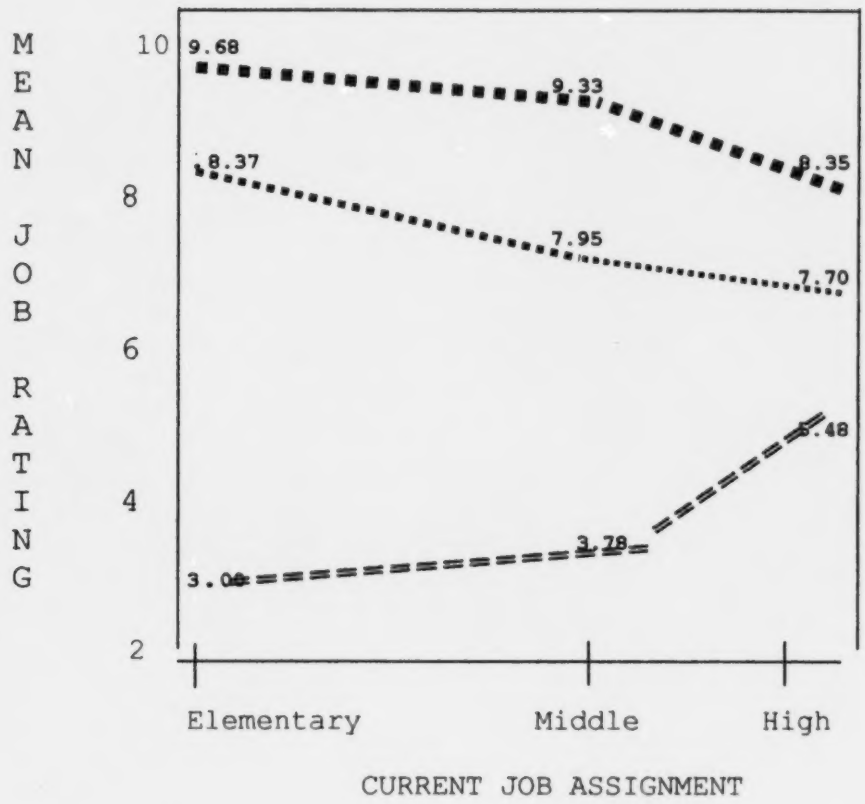
Note. Repeated measures resulted in 567 observations.

*$p < .0001$

(a) Omega-squared = .64

(b) Omega-squared = .15

Figure 1. Graph of school achievement by school assignment interaction.



SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

In Need of Assistance
Progressing
Meets Goal